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# LIBBY LIVING WITH TOXIC

As mine executives face indictments, residents contend with doctors, as

SDMS Document ID



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Teacher Dean Herreid, left, instructs students Katie Dedrick, center, and Kyle Kolb in the editing of their documentary about asbestos poisoning in Libby, Mont.

COMING UP

■ 11 a.m.: Dr. Brad Black, of the Center for Asbestos-Related Disease.

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## COMING UP

### Libby health fair to address asbestos-related research

Asbestos-related research will be the focus of speakers at the Asbestos Health Fair on Saturday in Libby, Mont.

People with asbestos-related health problems and others can learn about clinical research opportunities and the rights of patients in clinical research studies, and research under way at the University of Montana.

Speakers will include:

■ 11 a.m.: Dr. Brad Black, of the Center for Asbestos Related Disease.

■ Noon: Ann Cook and Helena Hoas, of the National Rural Bioethics Project.

■ 1 p.m.: Liz Putman and Mark Pershouse, of the University of Montana.

The fair also will feature vendors of services and products related to the care of people with asbestos-related disease. Organizers plan to award door prizes and offer refreshments.

The event is scheduled from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the Ponderosa Room at Libby City Hall.

For more information, call (406) 293-9274.



An EPA worker, right, enters a home in Libby during efforts to rid it of poisonous asbestos. Homes were selected for cleanup based on soil and air samples, but many believe that every house should be cleaned.

# LIVING WITH TOXIC LEGACY

ctments, residents contend with doctors, asbestos cleanup and anger

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Story by Susan Drumheller  
Photos by Brian Plonka  
The Spokesman-Review

**L**IBBY, Mont. — Kyle Kolb squeezed into the hallway at City Hall with the other broadcast news reporters to get a shot of U.S. Sen. Max Baucus before he spoke about asbestos and health care at a town hall meeting Thursday.

It was the latest shoot for one of the newest documentary crews to tackle Libby's saga, where nearly a third of townspeople have been poisoned by the deadly asbestos fibers dug up from W.R. Grace's Zonolite mine for more than half a century.

The difference is Kolb, 19, and his crew of fellow alternative school students live here and are inheriting the problems and challenges of living in a Superfund site.

They've shot hazardous-materials workers cleaning up the railroad tracks and one another getting their lungs tested at the local clinic, and they've interviewed victims and government officials.

And while some old-timers view the recent criminal indictments of seven W.R. Grace executives with a sense of closure, these kids know they'll be seeing many sequels before the legacy of asbestos contamination ends. Questions remain about whether Libby's cleanup will be complete and how people diagnosed with asbestos-related lung disease will pay for their medical care.

"This is from our point of view," explained Kolb while editing in a classroom cluttered with computer monitors, laptops, books, paper cups and his teacher's lung X-rays. "What they did to our town is unbelievable."

At 40, teacher Dean Herreid

center, and Kyle Kolb in the editing of their documentary about asbestos poisoning in Libby, Mont.

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Zonolite insulation saturated with tremolite asbestos fibers is purged Wednesday from the attic of a home on Idaho Street in Libby. Workers hired by th

### Libby: Defendants plead 'innocent'

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is among the latest generation to be diagnosed with asbestos-related disease.

Herreid grew up alongside the railroad

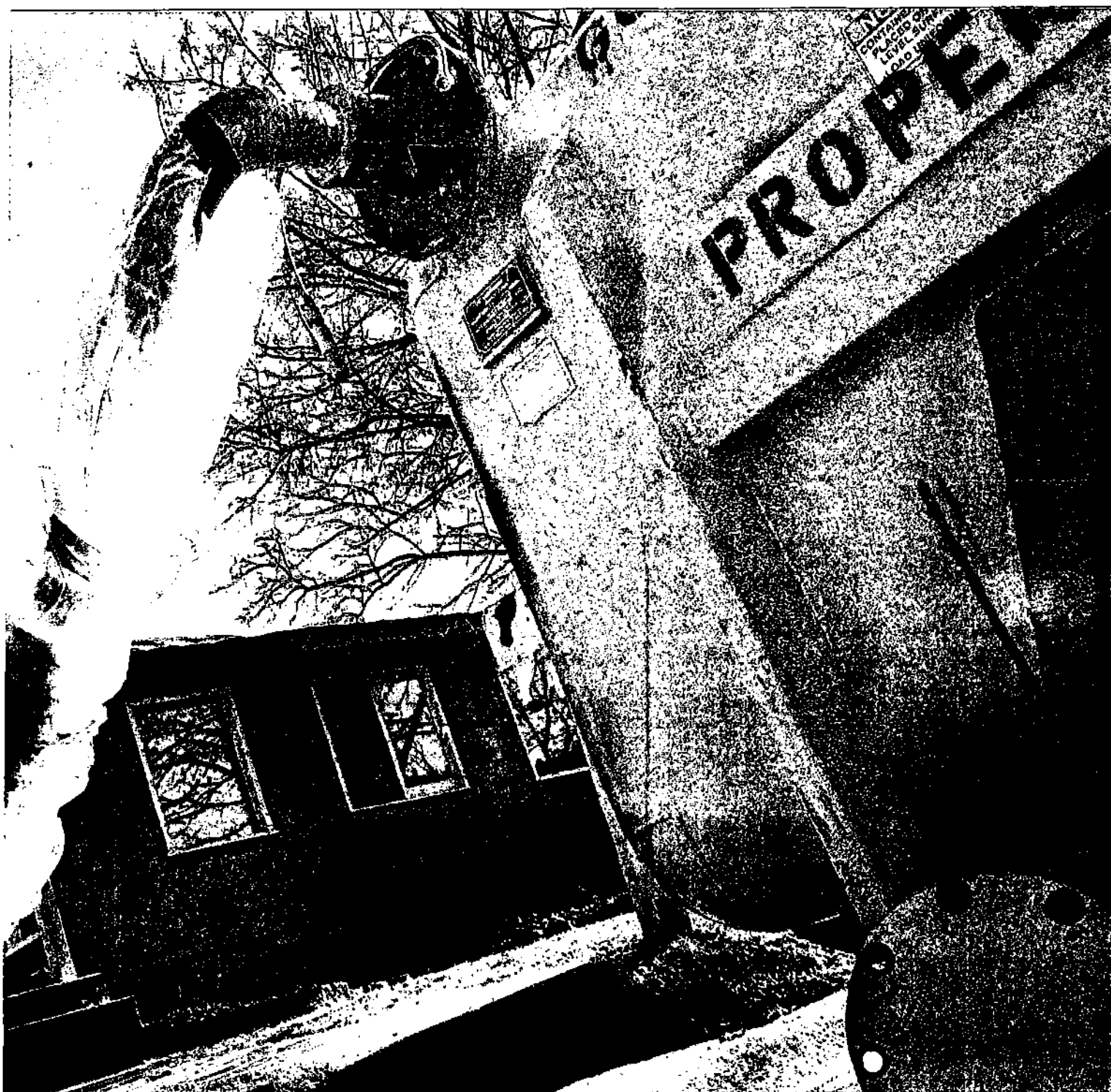
Missoula attorney monitoring federal asbestos liability legislation. "They keep extending the bankruptcy. That's been one of the frustrations."

Meanwhile, the EPA has been trying to



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Photos by Brian Plonka/The Spokesman-Review

from the attic of a home on Idaho Street in Libby. Workers hired by the EPA have cleaned about 350 homes in the small town. The waste goes to a landfill.

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He and others hope the recent indictments will lead to fines – a maximum amount of \$280 million is possible among the defendants – that could be directed to a medical trust fund for victims.

The CARD clinic also is trying to find funding to launch a clinical research facility in Libby to study the effects of tremolite

scary statement."

The EPA has \$17 million a year for cleanup and is trying to clean 170 to 200 homes a year, according to Wendy Thomi, EPA community involvement coordinator. About 350 homes are done, leaving as many as 1,000 to go, she said. Tests on completed homes are coming back clean in

asbestos-laced ore from the Zonolite mine to processing plants around the country, including Spokane.

"When they were backing the cars back and forth ... hooking up more cars, and the stuff would leak out," Herreid recalled. "And us stupid kids would pile it up, and then the trains would come and hit it and poof it. It would stir that stuff up something fierce. You'd create a devil's tongue."

The vermiculite mined in Libby was used primarily in the manufacture of insulation and as a soil conditioner. But Libby's vermiculite is laced with tremolite asbestos, a form of asbestos that's many times more toxic than the type more commonly found in products such as brake shoes and fireproofing materials.

Still, Kolb and his classmates have taken a larger view of the problem and consider Libby lucky in some respects.

"The ones (documentaries) you've seen before say it's so contaminated, but it really could be the cleanest town around after the cleanup is done," Kolb said. The point they want to make is that Libby's vermiculite has wound up in homes and products all over the country.

"I want to help people know and understand what's going on in this town and what could happen to them," said Katie Dedrick, 17, who played in a vermiculite-contaminated playground at her elementary school. Thirty-four people in her extended family have been diagnosed with asbestos-related disease. "I want to see everything cleaned up."

### Elusive justice

On Tuesday, the seven W.R. Grace defendants appeared in federal district court in Missoula to plead innocent to charges of conspiracy, violations of the clean air act, wire fraud and obstruction of justice. The indictments allege that Alan Stringer, the last general manager of the Zonolite mine, along with six other Grace officials knowingly released asbestos into the air and placed workers and the Libby community in danger of death or serious injury.

Numerous studies, tests and chest X-rays over the decades told Grace that Libby's tremolite asbestos was deadly – but workers and townspeople were unaware of the danger.

The allegations were hardly news to folks in Libby, but justice has been elusive for most victims here. Hundreds of lawsuits against W.R. Grace from Libby residents have been on hold since the company filed for bankruptcy in 2001.

"These people have been able to use bankruptcy courts to avoid paying people who they owe," said Milt Datzopoulos, a

W.R. Grace since the agency launched an emergency cleanup in 2000. The EPA won its cost-recovery case against Grace, but the corporation has appealed the ruling.

When Stringer appeared on the front page of the Missoulian on Wednesday leaving the courtroom with a smile on his face, it infuriated some Libby residents.

"I saw in the paper them smirking and laughing," said Donald Shea, who held his wife's oxygen tank for her while she waited for a lung examination at Libby's Center for Asbestos Related Disease clinic. "All killers, is what they are. I have no sympathy for them."

Others see Stringer as the fall guy for the corporation. Stringer faces the most counts in the indictment and could spend up to 70 years in prison.

"It was a good start, but we need to move up the line," Herreid said. "That's where this needs to go, whether it's W.R. Grace or whether it's politicians turning a blind eye."

Paul Rumelhart, head of the local economic development corporation, said he's skeptical of the charges.

"Alan Stringer is not a vicious guy," he said. "When the mine closed, he pleaded with me to find jobs for his workers."

Politicians in Washington, D.C., meanwhile, are busy trying to draw up legislation that will compensate asbestos victims and protect corporations from bankruptcy at the same time. Some Republican lawmakers are worried that the latest bill demands too much money from corporations, while Libby residents are worried that it still doesn't address their form of disease.

"The devil's in the details," admitted Baucus during Thursday's town meeting. "If there are loopholes, we will find them and we will gum up the works."

### Buying air, time

The money is needed mainly for medical care.

In Libby, more than 1,400 people have been diagnosed with asbestos-related disease so far. It can take decades for the disease to show itself. More than 300 Libby patients used to travel to Spokane to see lung specialist Alan Whitehouse. Now semi-retired, Whitehouse moved his practice to Libby's CARD clinic, where he and Dr. Brad Black specialize in treating lung disease.

Whitehouse said he's diagnosed eight to 10 new cases since early January, and his patients are getting younger.

"We had a 31-year-old in here today," Whitehouse said Wednesday. "He got it as a kid playing around with this stuff."

About 800 people are currently getting their asbestos-related X-rays,



A photo of vermiculite miner Virgil Priest, who died of asbestosis in 1982, hangs in the home of his widow, Alice. Alice Priest, 82, also has the disease.

appointments and prescriptions paid through a Grace-funded health plan the company set up shortly before the federal government started screening people for asbestos-related lung problems here in May 2000. Even with the plan, Whitehouse said it can be difficult to get medical costs covered.

"Now we have trouble getting oxygen to people," he said. "I'm constantly writing letters to Grace's insurance company."

Many observers predict Grace's plan will soon evaporate – possibly when the bankruptcy case is finally resolved. Given the long-term nature of the disease, and more than 2,000 asbestos-related cases expected in Libby, Whitehouse said the community desperately needs a trust fund of some kind to pay those medical bills.



## Libby references

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■ **"Libby, Montana"**: This two-hour

played in Sandpoint, Helena, Bozeman and Missoula. Its next showing in the region will be March 20 at the Hazel Wolf

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The center also could help the local economy, they say, which has been wracked by sawmill and mine closures and only recently has started to rebound.

### Unfinished business

Nine years ago, Whitehouse told Les Skramstad that he only had five to 10 years to live because of asbestos scarring in his lungs. Skramstad, a former miner and outspoken advocate for asbestos victims, now has difficulty getting his bony frame out of bed or his easy chair.

While becoming increasingly frail, Skramstad continues to fight for Libby's clean bill of health.

"We need to go back to square one and do a much better, thorough and complete cleanup," he said last week.

When the EPA came to Libby in 1999, the agency launched an emergency cleanup, and Libby later became a Superfund site. The agency started with the most obvious sources of contamination – such as the former Grace properties in and near town – and now is focusing more on individual homes with vermiculite insulation or gardens filled with vermiculite, and other scattered sources of contamination.

Driving around Libby, it doesn't take long to find a home surrounded by yellow tape with hoses extending in and out, attached to large tanks as suited up asbestos workers vacuum the vermiculite from attics and ceilings.

But walls are left alone, as are any sources with less than 1 percent tremolite asbestos, under current EPA cleanup guidelines. That rankles Skramstad.

"They say it's physically impossible to remove it all," he said. "That, to me, is a

Originally, the EPA hoped to get \$40 million a year and complete the cleanup in about three years, said Paul Peronard, former on-site coordinator for the EPA under the emergency cleanup.

"It's going to take longer, and you have to start making harder decisions about how you manage materials, and the walls are the classic example of that," he said.

While the average cost to clean a house is supposed to be about \$30,000, it cost contractors \$125,000 to clean Les and Norita Skramstad's house, they said, and that didn't include what they paid to replace the carpet: \$1,538.16.

"They cut it up in pieces and put it in bags and took it to the dump," Skramstad said.

Still on the drawing board is the cleanup of homes and properties in neighboring Troy, Mont.

But no one is planning to address the Zonolite insulation that remains in millions of homes across the United States. Top government officials have declined to declare a public health emergency that would have set in motion a national cleanup effort.

The students in Herreid's media class want to point out this oversight with their documentary, which is scheduled to premiere at Missoula's Roxy Theater in June.

"People could be getting it (asbestos-related disease) now and die later just because they're uninformed," student Katie Dedrick said. "We want anybody and everybody to watch it."

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